THE HEROINE'S JOURNEY
PRESENTED BY TUMI

Girlboss founder and CEO Sophia Amoruso poses in front of "The Heroine's Journey," a mural commissioned by the luggage company Tumi, during the 2019 Girlboss Rally at UCLA. | Emma McIntyre/Getty Images for Girlboss

The death of the girlboss

Girlbosses convinced us they would change capitalism. We weren't wrong in hoping they would.

By Alex Abad-Santos | alex@vox.com | Jun 7, 2021, 9:00am EDT

SHARE

The girlboss is one of the cruelest tricks capitalism ever perpetrated. Born in the mid-2010s, she was simultaneously a power fantasy and a utopian promise. As a female business leader — be she a CEO, an aspiring CEO, or an independent MLM superseller — the girlboss was going to unapologetically will empires from the rubble of rejection and underestimation she faced all her life. As companies grew in her image, so did her mythos; her legacy would be grand and fair, because equality was coming to work. Everyone was supposed to win when girlbosses won.

Hard work would finally pay off.

What set girlbosses apart from regular bosses was pinning feminism to hustle. Women like Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg and former Nasty Gal CEO Sophia Amoruso — who coined the term — were finally wrangling power away from the men who had held it for so long, which was seen as a form of justice. As the concept was codified, the idea of the girlboss became about the melding of professional self and identity, capitalist aspiration, and a specific (and arguably limited) vision of empowerment.

"Literally every woman that I look up to is unrelatable," **Rachel Hollis, a very wealthy self-help guru, said** in a TikTok video in April, describing how she wills herself to wake up at 4 am to conquer her day. **Hollis wrote in 2016** how much she hated the term, but quotes like hers crystallize the girlboss mentality.

"If my life is relatable to most people, I'm doing it wrong," she continued, and in the accompanying caption she compared herself to a slew of unrelatable women she looks up to, including Harriet Tubman.

Sign up for The Goods newsletter

Each week we'll send you the very best from The Goods, plus a special internet culture edition by Rebecca Jennings on Wednesdays. **Sign up here.**

If Hollis's fetish for relentless, unstoppable work and comparison of herself to the creator of the Underground Railroad is a prime example of a girlboss gone wild, so was the swift backlash.

Hollis's most generous critics saw her words as a moment of unchecked privilege. Her sterner critics called her out in disgust, pointing to Hollis's casual dehumanization of her housekeeper, whom she described as the woman who "cleans her toilets," and her Tubman comparison as examples of typical, wrongheaded girlboss attitudes. People **who worked for Hollis** corroborated her off-putting conduct. She was, in their view, just another white woman co-opting empowerment and feminism for profit, with no intention of lifting anyone else up.

Hollis is the latest in a recent spate of corporate women leaders — including **Away CEO Steph Korey** and **certain founders of luxury spin classes** — who create companies plagued with stories of bullying, cruelty, and overworked and underappreciated staff. It now seems as though toxic work environments were a feature of their design and not coincidental bugs. Perhaps working for a girlboss was just like working any other job.

As more and more of these stories surfaced, "girlboss" shifted culturally from a noun to a verb, one that described the sinister process of capitalist success and hollow female empowerment. On TikTok and Twitter, girlboss the verb became yoked to "gaslight" and "gatekeep" to create a kind of "live, laugh, love" of toxic, usually white feminism.

"Gaslight every moment, Gatekeep every day, Girlboss beyond words," one image macro reads.

But it's not that people wanted the girlboss to fail; it's the opposite. The concept of the girlboss failed us all.

The girlboss brought to life a way to talk about real concerns and barriers in the system honestly and frankly. It also posited a solution so blazingly simple — put women in charge — that it could never work.

We wanted it to be this easy to buck the whole system. When it turned out women CEOs were just CEOs, we never let them forget it.

The girlboss succeeded because of benevolent sexism

Look at this woman, completely unfazed by the fluttering money around her! | EyeEm via Getty Images

Girlboss's slow march toward irony was supercharged when the neologism officially got a name seven years ago.

"In 2014, Sophia Amoruso's memoir, called ***#Girlboss*, comes out**. This is where the word comes from," feminist author and poet Leigh Stein explained to me. Stein is arguably the world's foremost authority on the girlboss movement, having studied and written **an entire novel** about it. "That same year, Beyoncé performed at the VMAs in front of a sign that says 'feminist' illuminated in bright letters. As we all know, anything Beyoncé does is a huge cultural moment."

Stein pointed out that at the time, the idea of bringing feminism, or some kind of feminism à la carte, into the corporate world was inescapable. Beyoncé and figures like Amoruso punctuated it, but it had begun brewing a year earlier, when Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg published her **lauded and controversial memoir *Lean In*** in 2013. The book sold more than 4 million copies worldwide, and established a language to talk about women's issues in a corporate environment. Amoruso swooped in with the shorthand soon after.

"When you look at the actual word 'girlboss,' there may be some internalized sexism," Alexandra Solomon, a professor who specializes in gender and gender roles at Northwestern University, told me. "Research shows that as women get older, and as women become more powerful, they are perceived as less likable. So by using that term girlboss, there's a desire to be powerful but a fear of losing likability."

In some aspects, Solomon explained, the girlboss label allowed women to assert power or lean in without threatening or alienating people around them. Calling oneself a "girl" could be seen as a compromise, but it was also a way to maneuver around traditional beliefs and systems that had historically diminished women's voices.

Riding on feminism's increased cultural cachet (as boosted by high-performance Beyoncé octane), Sandberg, Amoruso, and the girlbosses who came after them seemed to propose (along with the press that **breathlessly profiled them**) that women advocating for themselves and their worth was, intrinsically, a form of justice.

In this context, power and money became measures of equality, and rising to power in a capitalist system turned into an empowering feminist victory. It was a way of framing financial success and consumerism as goodness. The implicit promise was that if consumers made these girlbosses successful, it would mean better working conditions for women, and with that, maybe empowerment for all.

"If these women could succeed while upholding feminist values and treating their employees humanely, then maybe the patriarchy was just a choice that savvy consumers could shop their way around," Amanda Mull wrote in **the Atlantic in 2020**, explaining how the girlboss concept had entwined itself with justice. "Maybe people could vote for equality by buying a particular set of luggage or joining a particular co-working space."

That cultural moment seemed to manifest itself in women-led startups such as **Glossier**, a direct-to-consumer cosmetics company launched in 2014; Away, a luggage retailer created in 2015; and **the Wing**, a coworking space for women founded in 2016.

The media narrative surrounding these very different companies' origins was pretty similar: A woman, or a group of women, **has an idea for a company** that fulfills a need for young women especially; **funding is difficult to find** (because venture capitalists underestimate women) but is eventually secured; a unique company is created, one that is an extension of the founders' backstories and forged by their struggles; the women succeed because they've leaned into their **strengths as female founders**, and in doing so overcome a specific stripe of sexism.

Girlboss language wasn't just used in the C-suite stratosphere. It trickled down to **lower-level workers and eventually multilevel marketing schemes**. Tethering feminism to hard work and entrepreneurship with justice fit seamlessly into MLMs, which have their own predatory **horror stories** and are built on exploiting **tight-knit, predominantly female communities** with promises of financial success.

But mythologizing the girlboss didn't last very long.

In 2015, Amoruso's Nasty Gal became the subject of a discrimination lawsuit alleging it had illegally fired pregnant employees. After it was filed, **employees came forward** with stories about how Amoruso's company was a toxic workplace. In 2016, Nasty Gal filed for bankruptcy.

In 2018, as criticism of Facebook's handling of Russian election meddling, misinformation, and personal data abuse mounted, Sandberg's bullying behavior and attempts to discredit the company's critics came to light in a New York Times **report**.

In 2019, **The Verge reported** on Away employees' allegations that co-founder and co-CEO Steph Korey bullied employees, and that the company wasn't as inclusive or diverse as it had claimed.

In 2020, **former employees** of feminist oasis the Wing said the coworking and social space created was only for show, and that working there was an exercise in being undermined. They also alleged that Black and brown employees were mistreated. The Wing founder Audrey Gelman **stepped down that June**.

The same year, **employees at Glossier alleged** they faced discrimination from both their company and the customers they served. They said upper management was predominantly white women.

Similar allegations of toxic work environments and discriminatory behavior surfaced at women-led media outlets such as **Refinery29, Man Repeller, Who What Wear, and Vogue**, as well as women's clothing company **Reformation** and the women-founded luxury exercise chain **SoulCycle**.

Like their origin stories, these companies' reckonings had a similar trajectory: The businesses touted themselves as inclusive communities built by women, but behind closed doors, some employees said, was a toxic and sometimes abusive mix of, well, **gaslighting** and gatekeeping. Those revelations hurt these brands with their consumers.

"A huge part of the problem is if you make feminism part of your brand, then your customers are going to say, 'Wait a second. Are you a feminist company behind the scenes? Or is [it] just optics, like optical allyship?'" Stein told me.

Girlboss-branded companies failing to live up to their own standards prompted **thoughtful pieces** about the way we think and frame women's ambitions, and why these problems seemed to be ingrained into the companies' design.

"NO ONE'S IN THE COMMENT SECTION SAYING JEFF BEZOS IS BAD AT FEMINISM"

In June 2020, Stein herself wrote a viral think piece asserting the death of the girlboss. Her most convincing point was that girlboss failures weren't some new folly or unique to women; this was, quite simply, capitalism.

"The rise and fall of the girlboss says more about how comfortable we've become mixing capitalism with social justice, as we look to corporations to implement social changes because we've lost faith in our public institutions to do so," **Stein wrote**.

The success these companies achieved in linking gender to their brand belies the idea that women are more virtuous, kind, and gentle; they weren't supposed to succumb to greed or power, to commit the same terrible abuses male CEOs perpetuate.

"There's a lens or mentality that a female boss will be more nurturing," Northwestern's Solomon told me. "It's a setup. Her clear boundaries are then perceived as cruel boundaries or punitive. Or it goes the other way, and people perceive her gentleness as weakness."

Girlboss downfalls, under this line of thinking, aren't seen as just a failure of business but also as a betrayal of their gender.

The allegations of discrimination and toxic work culture at girlboss-led companies are undoubtedly serious, Stein said. But at the same time, "there's kind of a trap" when it comes to how we talk about those business failures. She argues it's possible to have conversations about what went wrong without losing sight of accountability or laying these failures at the feet of women writ large.

"There's a whole **exposé** in the Times about the Amazon work culture and how it sounds like a nightmare to work at Amazon. But no one's in the comment section, like, saying Jeff Bezos is bad at feminism," Stein said. "Women are held to account for how ethical and virtuous they are as leaders in a way that men are not."

Why girlbossing was always going to be an empty promise

A notebook for girlbosses to, if they felt like it, document their girlbossing. | Emma McIntyre/Getty Images for Girlboss

In speaking to experts about the rise and fall of the girlboss, the one theme that kept surfacing is that while the term ultimately flopped, the enthusiasm surrounding it was real. The barriers facing women in corporate structures, the desire to make workplaces better by making them more inclusive, the anger from being overlooked in current systems — it's all authentic.

Lindsey Bier, a professor at USC's Marshall School of Business who specializes in gender communication, explained that one of the reasons she thinks the term became so popular and its downfall so magnified is the lack of empowerment women face in the workplace. For more than a decade, she explained, study after study was published about how women in leadership roles were penalized for how they talked to their employees.

"Men in leadership positions are expected to be assertive and direct. Women, however, face a paradoxical situation in which they're judged if they're not assertive enough, but then they're also judged if they are too assertive and direct," Bier told me. "The data shows that both men and women judge women in leadership in this way."

The girlboss wave of feminist-adjacent corporate empowerment offered an unapologetic promise that women would not be judged or undermined the way they would in traditional corporate settings. The hard work they put into their jobs would finally be rewarded. But the promise became emptier when basic scrutiny revealed that employees at these companies, particularly women of color, still ended up feeling overlooked, overshadowed, or even bullied.

"You've changed the bodies of the people who are sitting at the table, but you haven't changed the table," Solomon said, explaining that girlboss offered to dismantle the system but opted for cosmetic changes.

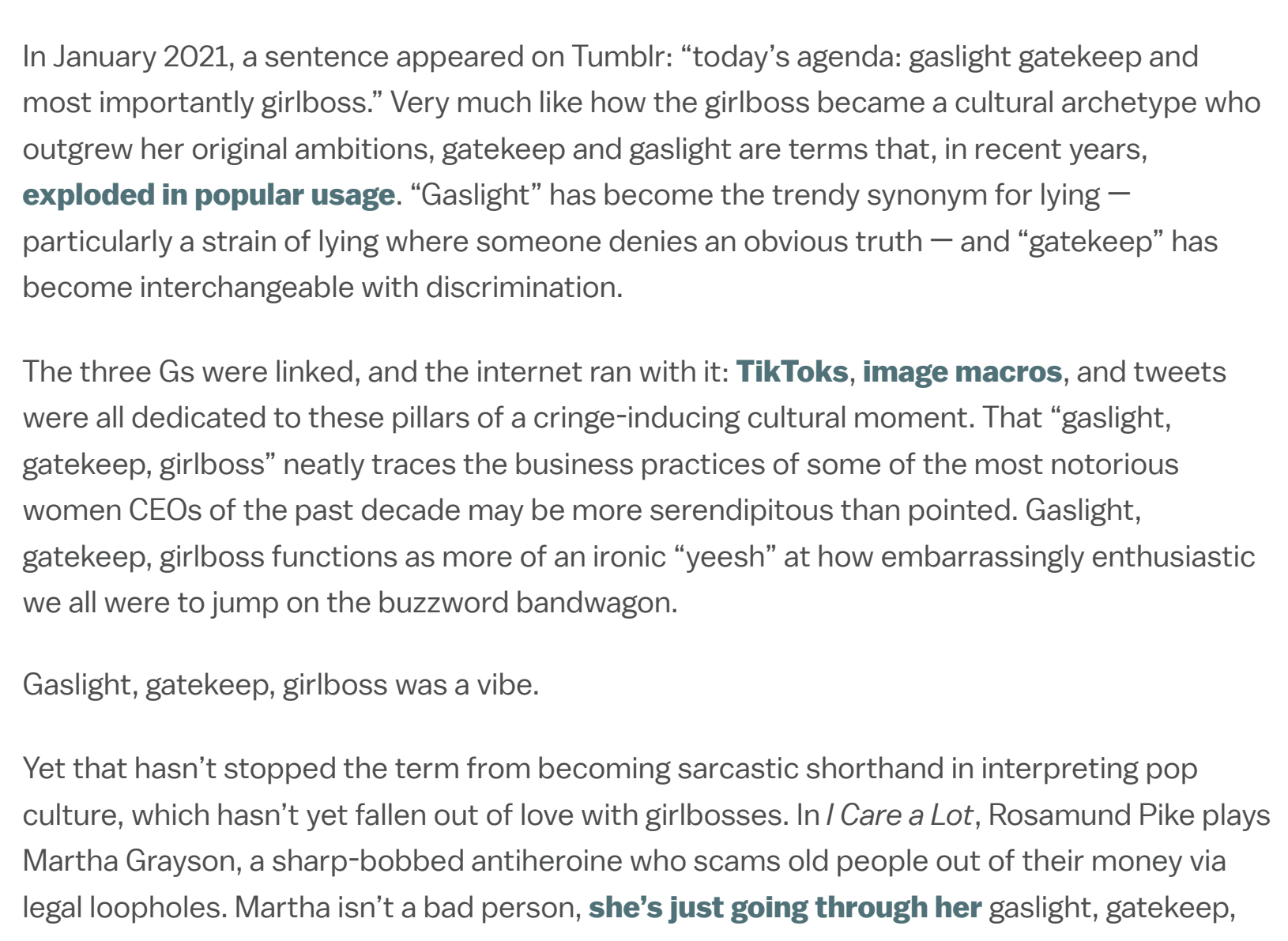
"YOU'VE CHANGED THE BODIES OF THE PEOPLE WHO ARE SITTING AT THE TABLE, BUT YOU HAVEN'T CHANGED THE TABLE"

The energy and desire for something better still exists. Both Bier and Solomon told me that younger people and members of Gen Z are more aware than previous generations when it comes to companies' and brands' values, and they factor in those values — e.g., equality, diversity, inclusion — when deciding where to spend their money. This is a shift from previous generations, which looked for their government to enact change.

While that sentiment can be reassuring, Stein is a little more cynical when it comes to getting corporations and capitalism to bend to a consumer's will. Pinning hopes on CEOs to dismantle structural barriers is how we got into this mess in the first place. "I actually don't want to see more of us, like, yelling at Rachel Hollis to end racism in America. I don't think we're targeting our rage into the right place," Stein told me.

Expecting Hollis or Sandberg or Amoruso to fix systemic inequality in the United States is moot when they're not often given a chance to fix their own companies, Stein says. "I don't think we're actually giving them the opportunity to do better," she told me. "These girlbosses that are 29, 30, 31, 32 when they start the first company, they're publicly shamed in the press for their failures. Do they get to try again? Are we really saying as a culture, 'No, they don't get to try again'? That's what's unfair to me." Fixing their own businesses isn't as ambitious as solving America's deep problems, but it's at least a small step in changing the system.

If you laugh at the girlboss, she can't hurt you



Getty Images has a lot of stock photography of women in offices laughing maniacally. | Getty Images

In January 2021, a sentence appeared on Tumblr: "today's agenda: gaslight gatekeep and most importantly girlboss." Very much like how the girlboss became a cultural archetype who outgrew her original ambitions, gatekeep and gaslight are terms that, in recent years, **exploded in popular usage**. "Gaslight" has become the trendy synonym for lying — particularly a strain of lying where someone denies an obvious truth — and "gatekeep" has become interchangeable with discrimination.

The three Gs were linked, and the internet ran with it: **TikToks**, **image macros**, and tweets were all dedicated to these pillars of a cringe-inducing cultural moment. That "gaslight, gatekeep, girlboss" neatly traces the business practices of some of the most notorious women CEOs of the past decade may be more serendipitous than pointed. Gaslight, gatekeep, girlboss functions as more of an ironic "yeesh" at how embarrassingly enthusiastic we all were to jump on the buzzword bandwagon.

Gaslight, gatekeep, girlboss was a vibe.

Yet that hasn't stopped the term from becoming sarcastic shorthand in interpreting pop culture, which hasn't yet fallen out of love with girlbosses. In *I Care a Lot*, Rosamund Pike plays Martha Grayson, a sharp-bobbed antiheroine who scams old people out of their money via legal loopholes. Martha isn't a bad person, **she's just going through her** gaslight, gatekeep, girlboss **arc**.

The marketing for Disney's new **Cruella de Vil** origin story, wherein Cruella is an aspiring fashion designer at odds with an even-crueler Baroness, calls to mind ads for Glossier. The phrase has even been tossed at Bethenny Frankel, who in interviews says she hates the word **girlboss**. Yet, in her new *Apprentice*-like reality competition show, *The Big Shot With Bethenny*, she's portrayed as a mean and awful boss who's also supposed to be the protagonist.

Recently, the CIA, an organization that's known to partake in torture, **created an entire ad** about how it's an inclusive place for women to thrive. It's not torture, the internet replied, it's just **girlboss, gaslighting, and gatekeeping** with some water.

Gaslight, gatekeep, girlboss becoming a meme that's now used to point out the hollowness of capitalism or organizations like the CIA co-opting social justice talk feels like the last gasps of the girlboss. As the pandemic brought job losses and shined a light on wealth inequality, many of us may be more cynical and weary about our corporate overlords — no matter what form they take — than we were in 2013.

Solomon, who specializes in gender psychology at Northwestern, pointed me to **Audre Lorde's 1984** essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." Lorde wrote about how systems like white supremacy and patriarchy perpetuate themselves and how difficult it is to break them apart:

> For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.

In the context of girlbosses, these women in powerful positions was never going to buck the capitalist and patriarchal system because there was never an intent to change it — just wield it. Solomon explains that a lot of girlbosses learned to navigate and were supported by a capitalist system. The more they were exposed, the better the rest of us got at recognizing that it "sure as hell is just easier to use the master's tools," Solomon said.

Maybe mocking the girlboss to the point of redefinition takes back a little of that power. Redefined through comedy, she turns into a joke. The girlboss can't hurt you if you can laugh at her.

Laughing makes it easier to admit that we got played, that we were once able to foolishly hope that a group of women were going to fix an entire system. It's pretty funny, even if we wanted them to.

You've read 1 article in the last 30 days.

Will you support Vox's explanatory journalism?

Millions turn to Vox to educate themselves, their family, and their friends about what's happening in the world around them, and to learn about things that spark their curiosity. Financial contributions from our readers are a critical part of supporting our resource-intensive work and help us keep our journalism free for all. **Please consider making a one-time contribution to Vox today.**

One-Time | Monthly | Annual

○ $95/year ● $120/year
○ $250/year ○ Other

Yes, I'll give $120/year

We accept credit card, Apple Pay, and Google Pay. You can also contribute via PayPal

THE GOODS
When you can't speak to the manager — or anyone

POLITICS & POLICY
FairTax, the GOP plan for a 30 percent national sales tax, explained

SCIENCE & HEALTH
The Federal Reserve is starting a climate experiment

View all stories in Business & Finance

© 2023 Vox Media, LLC. All Rights Reserved.